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WASHINGTON - U.S. government officials authorized giving nearly \$1 million in foreign aid to a Palestinian university with links to the terrorist group Hamas, despite vetting the school eight times for ties to terrorism, according to a government audit.

The audit concluded that the vetting process, initiated by the U.S. Agency for International Development and conducted by the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv, found no "derogatory information" on the Islamic University in Gaza between 2002 and 2006 -- even after Hamas claimed a parliamentary majority in Palestinian elections in 2006. Several times, university officials certified that they provided no material support for terrorism.

A companion audit found that USAID's operations in Gaza and the West Bank have largely implemented policies to keep future aid out of terrorist hands.

Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) asked USAID's inspector general to conduct the audits after a Washington Times report detailed some of the aid payments to Islamic University earlier this year. He said in an interview Tuesday that the failure to detect terrorist ties at the school suggested "either incompetence or a complete breakdown of the vetting system as run by the State Department."

The U.S. designated Hamas a terrorist organization in 1997. Hamas' prime minister sits on the Islamic University's board of trustees. In January, Palestinian security forces seized assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades during a raid of the university.

U.S. law prohibits transactions with terrorists or their supporters. A USAID audit last month, also requested by Kirk, concluded the government has inadequate controls in place to stop foreign aid from flowing to terrorists -- and that USAID had funded terrorist-linked groups on at least two occasions.

One of the follow-up audits concludes that USAID "did not always follow applicable federal laws" when approving aid to the University. That includes several occasions where grant recipients did not receive a notice detailing their responsibility to avoid using aid dollars to support terrorism.

Most of those occasions came between 2003 and 2005, before USAID implemented new anti-terrorist funding policies, the audit concluded.

In an appendix to the audit, USAID officials disputed any implication that they violated laws. The number of times the university was vetted -- and the lack of any red flags -- along with the university's anti-terrorism certifications "indicate compliance with the law," West Bank and Gaza Mission Director Howard Sumka wrote.